HOURLY NEWS
NPR 24 Hour Program Stream
On Air Now
LISTEN LIVE
PLAYLIST

npr

DONATE

WORLD

Ex-Liberian Leader Defies War Crimes Tribunal

JUNE 4, 2007 · 9:45 AM ET

Former Liberian President Charles Taylor didn't show up for the opening of his war crimes trial, and his assigned lawyer walked out of the courtroom in a dramatic opening to the landmark first international tribunal of a former African leader.

Lawyer Karim Khan said Taylor had fired him and wanted to act as his own defense attorney. Khan walked out even though Presiding Judge Julia Sebutinde of Uganda repeatedly directed him to continue to represent Taylor, if only for the opening day.

Apologizing and defying threats of contempt of court, Khan gathered his files and left the room.

"This is not defense counsel making some cheap trick," Khan told The Associated Press outside the courtroom. Taylor "thought this was a railroad to a conviction, and in those circumstances, he exercised his right to terminate my representation and to represent himself."

The court ordered the trial to continue, and Chief Prosecutor Stephen Rapp began outlining the horrors inflicted on Sierra Leone villagers by forces allegedly under Taylor's control.

The attackers randomly murdered people and enslaved others to use as fighters, miners and farmers, Rapp said. Then "the attackers would mutilate — amputating arms, limbs, gouging eyes. Children conscripted by the attackers killing their own parents," he added.

Sponsor Message

Taylor, 59, has pleaded not guilty to 11 charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The court has no death sentence and no maximum sentence if he is convicted.

The prosecution was making a four-hour opening statement Monday, after which the case was to adjourn for three weeks. It was unclear who would be sitting on the defense bench when it resumes June 25. The trial is expected to last 18 months.

In a letter read to judges by Khan, Taylor claimed he had been prevented from seeing a court official mandated with making sure he is properly defended and that his one court-appointed attorney was heavily outgunned by the prosecution team of nine.

"At one time, I had confidence in this court's ability to dispense justice. Over time, it has become clear that confidence has been misplaced," Taylor's statement said. "I will not receive a fair trial."

Sebutinde, the presiding judge, repeatedly interrupted Khan's reading of Taylor's letter, demanding an explanation for Taylor's absence.

"We are not interested in political speeches," she told the lawyer.

The atrocities in Sierra Leone's 1991-2002 civil war are well-documented. Fighters — often children drugged and turned into merciless killers at brutal rebel training camps — murdered thousands of men, women and children and mutilated more by hacking off hands and limbs with axes and machetes. Women were raped and abducted to become sex slaves.

Sponsor Message

Many victims had the initials of rebel groups carved into their skin with burning-hot bayonets. Children were sent out with burlap bags to hack off and collect limbs and were punished if the bags were not full when they returned.

When witnesses begin testifying, survivors, including amputees, will take the stand along with former allies from Taylor's inner sanctum who will be critical to proving he controlled rebels responsible for atrocities in another country.

Taylor was indicted in 2003, accused of sponsoring Sierra Leone's rebel Revolutionary United Front in exchange for diamonds. Taylor agreed to give up power and go into exile, but he was arrested in Nigeria in March 2006.

He was transferred to The Hague a year ago amid fears that his trial in Sierra Leone could trigger fresh violence in the region. His trial will take place in a courtroom rented from the International Criminal Court by the U.N.-backed court that usually sits in Sierra Leone and was established to try those held most responsible for the war.

From The Associated Press

Reminder: It takes all of us.

Time after time, the NPR Network steps up to meet the challenges of our times with trustworthy reporting and programming.

We don't do it alone.

This community has always been our backbone, standing strong with us by donating. Together, we uphold the standards of well-informed public discourse. Giving Tuesday is in just a few days—are you joining in?

YES, I'LL DONATE

More Stories From NPR

WORLD

South Korea's Justice Ministry imposes travel ban on President Yoon over martial law

UKRAINE INVASION — EXPLAINED

Russia targets Ukraine's energy grid as winter sets in. Here's how one plant copes

THE PICTURE SHOW

Photos: See the fall of Damascus after Syrian rebels topple Assad's regime

WORLD

Syrians ransack Assad's private residence in Damascus after the regime's downfall

WORLD

In Syria, the Assads leave a bitter legacy after a half-century of repressive rule

MIDDLE EAST

Assad is granted asylum in Russia as rebels seize control of the Syrian capital

Popular on NPR.org

MUSIC

Lawsuit accuses Jay-Z of raping a 13-year-old with Sean 'Diddy' Combs in 2000

MIDDLE EAST

Who are the rebels who have toppled the regime in Syria?

NATIONAL

NYPD releases 2 new photos of man sought in killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO

CULTURE

Kennedy Center pays tribute to the Grateful Dead, Bonnie Raitt, Sandoval and The Apollo

NATIONAL

Mississippi communities scarred by ICE raids fear future under Trump

PUBLIC HEALTH

Why these doctors started writing medical 'prescriptions' for solar power

NPR Editors' Picks

TECHNOLOGY

Artificial Intelligence wants to go nuclear. Will it work?

BUSINESS

Under Trump, an 'all of the above' energy policy is poised for a comeback

BEST MUSIC OF 2024

The 10 Best Classical Albums of 2024

NATIONAL

Ruby slippers worn in 'The Wizard of Oz' are auctioned for a record $28 million

POLITICS

Trump focuses on tariffs, not retribution, in first network TV interview

LIFE, AFTER DIAGNOSIS

Cancer interrupted their school lives, but also set them on a mission

READ & LISTEN

Home

News

Culture

Music

Podcasts & Shows

CONNECT

Newsletters

Facebook

Instagram

Press

Public Editor

Corrections

Contact & Help

ABOUT NPR

Overview

Diversity

NPR Network

Accessibility

Ethics

Finances

GET INVOLVED

Support Public Radio

Sponsor NPR

NPR Careers

NPR Shop

NPR Events

NPR Extra

terms of use

privacy

your privacy choices

text only

© 2024 npr